

Oddities

by

Arthur O. R. Thormann

Specfab Industries Ltd.

Edmonton, Alberta

2010

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Thormann, Arthur O. R. (Arthur Otto Rudolf), 1934-
Oddities / Arthur O.R. Thormann

ISBN 978-0-9685198-7-5

1. Philosophy—Miscellanea. I. Title.

PN6631.T54 2010

081

c2010-901414-6

Copyright © Arthur O.R. Thormann, 2010

Publisher: Specfab Industries Ltd.
13559 - 123A Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T5L 2Z1
Telephone: 780-454-6396

Printer: PageMaster Publication Services Inc.
10180 - 105 Street
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T5J 1E1
Telephone: 780-425-9303

Cover Designs: Front: *From Zero to Infinity*
Back: *The One, and the Opposite, Point of View*
(both by the Author)

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotes, any use or reproduction requires the written consent of the publisher or the author.

Again, this book is for my grandchildren
Garett, Megan, Samantha, and Jordan.
I sincerely hope they will learn to
cope with the oddities in life.

In addition, my gratitude goes to my wife, Renate,
to my daughter Nancy, and to my friends
Diana McLeod, Pamela Sigvaldason,
and Edmund Lee, for their valued advice.
All mistakes remaining are entirely mine.

Preface

Everywhere you care to look in this world, you will find vanity, bias, prejudice, illogic, misconception, false assumptions, and mental blocks.

Our lives exist in a sea of endless oddities – mostly illusions, whether optical illusions, like the Kanizsa Triangle, or mental illusions, like some of the ones mentioned in this book. The trick is, and always will be, to develop an ability to see beyond, to clarify the illusions, or oddities, in our minds.

In some respects, this book is a continuation of my book *Thoughts in a Maze*, which also addresses oddities. Where there is an overlap, this book enlarges on the ideas in *Thoughts in a Maze*.

Illusions often depend on one's viewpoint, and one's viewpoint may depend on a mental block that one has developed. To get rid of a mental block, one must first admit that one could be wrong, that there may be other, valid viewpoints. Let me illustrate this by a visual example.

On the back cover of this book, you will see a set of steps leading up to the left. The question is, are you looking at the top of these steps, or are you looking at the bottom of these steps? If your mind insists that you see only the top of these steps, try to change your viewpoint so that you also see the bottom of the steps, and vice versa. At first, you may find this to be extremely hard to accomplish, but please persist, because, take my word for it, the opposite viewpoint does exist.

Clinging only to one viewpoint is what mental blocks are all about. The causes of mental blocks can be manifold: our teachings, our religious beliefs, good or bad experiences, personal dislikes, and so on. The easiest way to avoid mental blocks, or get rid of them, is to question all alleged certainties, especially one's own certainty. Ask yourself, "What if I am wrong?"

The disadvantages of clinging to one viewpoint to the exclusion of all others, and the harm often caused by it, is one of the issues this book is trying to address by taking a closer look at the oddities that surround us. The visual images on the book cover intend to convey this message.

For the front cover, I have chosen my two favorite oddities: Zero and Infinity – see chapter, *The World of Math*. I also considered using Kanizsa's Triangle,¹ where you think you see a white triangle, but you are looking at an optical illusion, because the triangle does not exist. Take all the dark objects away, and the illusion of the white triangle disappears – amazing!

Gaetano Kanizsa's apparently visible but non-existent triangle is one of the rare oddities that I definitely want to bring to your attention, because the conclusions of our mental blocks are also often mentally clearly visible to us, but, in reality, non-existent.

Arthur O.R. Thormann
Edmonton, March 2010

¹ You can view the image on the internet.

Contents

Introduction	1
1 The World of Crude Oil.....	5
2 The World of Medicos.....	13
3 The World of Politics	21
4 The World of Litigation.....	29
5 The World of Pension Promise	37
6 The World of Finance.....	45
7 The World of Math.....	53
8 The World of Images.....	61
9 The World of Structures	67
10 The World of Chroniclers.....	75
11 The World of Bad News.....	83
12 The World of Vanity.....	93
Appendix: Selecting Stocks or Bonds.....	105
About the Author	109

Introduction

A few oddities addressed in this book have their roots in language. Language is one of the most important aspects in our lives. Even the Bible recognizes this: “In the beginning was the Word.”¹ The chapter *The World of Math* gives us questionable definitions, and the chapter *The World of Chroniclers* gives us doubtful translations. Quite often, the exact translation of words can convey wrong meanings. This is especially true with idioms. Take a simple description of time in two different countries. Half nine in Great Britain means half past nine, but in Germany it means half past eight. Translators who translate only the words will surely convey the wrong meaning.

However, we are into serious oddities when people feed us false premises and assumptions supported by indisputable facts. Some of you may recall when during the 1960s oil companies gave us raving, optimistic assumptions regarding the remaining crude oil in the world. They were trying to entice us to buy their shares. Then, during the 1970s, these oil companies reversed their standpoint and gave us dire predictions of oil shortages – the oil supply was going to disappear in thirty years. They wanted us to feel better about the high prices they were charging for gasoline. The oil industry is not alone in feeding us false premises and assumptions. In fact, when it suits

¹ St. John 1:1

Arthur O.R. Thormann

≈

their purposes, most other industries feed us false premises and assumptions at one time or another.

Take our defined-benefit pension plans. Both actuaries and legislators assume that, in the end, pension plans cannot earn more on their investments than government long-bond yields. If they do earn more, that is fine, but most legislation demands that pension funds maintain assets based on this assumption – just in case plan sponsors terminate pension plans prematurely. The assumption works fine when interest rates are in line with long-term equity returns, but it has disastrous results when interest rates are extremely low. Then, legislation or regulations that use this assumption force pension funds to set aside reserves that their pensioners could better use to keep up with ever-increasing costs.

Individuals also make false assumptions – in their personal activities as well as in their dealings with others. I recall one example of this when the Americans landed astronauts on the moon. One of my uncles flatly denied, because of his “indisputable” religious belief, that this took place. Another example occurred with one of my bookkeepers. She rightfully withheld any overcharges from the payment to a supplier. The supplier quickly issued invoices for the withheld amounts to keep track of them. Then, after verifying the correctness of the withheld amounts, the supplier issued credit invoices. My bookkeeper promptly deducted these credit invoices from the next payment to the supplier, and I was unable to convince her that she should not have done that. Her mental

Introduction

≈

block was solidly implanted.

People's false premises and assumptions usually cause their mental blocks. Once you remove these false premises and assumptions, all following actions based on them will collapse, and mental blocks will disappear. It is a little like a joker in a deck of cards. The joker can have an assigned value, but, if you remove the joker from a house of cards because it has no assigned value, the house of cards collapses.

The key to eliminating false premises and assumptions may lie in the art of asking. Daily, in our lives, we meet up with or ask various questions. Some of these questions have become almost meaningless, like when a stranger selling a product phones and asks you, "How are you?" These questions seldom require meaningful answers, although they are supposed to convey concern. Other questions, equally meaningless, express doubt, like "No kidding?" or "You don't say?" Nevertheless, most of our questions stem from genuine concern or curiosity. We may really be worried about someone's health; or, we may wish to clarify a point; or, we may seek directions; or, we may ask someone for a favor; or we may doubt some questionable premises and assumptions, which may lead us to ask some of the following questions:

- How is the world's remaining oil supply determined?
- Why do we overwork our doctors?
- How small is zero and how large is infinity?
- Why do some pension laws harm pensioners?
- How can vanity help or hinder our progress?

Arthur O.R. Thormann

≈

- How can we avoid losses on stocks and bonds?
- What must lawyers do to win their cases?
- How can we separate fact from fiction in the news?
- Where has our Christmas spirit gone?
- Why do chroniclers often get it wrong?
- How much trust can we put in ancient chronicles?
- How can translators improve their work?
- Why do politicians favor minorities?
- Why do politicians' good intentions go astray?
- Where can hazardous wastes be safely buried?
- How do reporters' opinions improve the news?
- What is odd about some of our images?
- How do our system structures help or hinder us?

These gnawing questions, and more, have prompted the explorations of the topics in the following chapters. Enjoy!

1

The World of Crude Oil

Crude oil¹ comes from organic sediments, consisting of dead plants and animals, saturated with nutrients, consisting mainly of phosphates and nitrates. Bacteria oxidize these sediments, which releases the nutrients into a basin that forms a nutrient trap. Nutrients positioned, some time during their history, at depths between 7,500 and 15,000 feet will form or liberate liquid crude oil, which tends to migrate upward. Porous reservoir rocks will then trap the oil, and the connectivity or permeability of the pore spaces allows the oil to flow through the rocks. A more solid rock layer closer to the surface, called a cap rock, prevents the oil from seeping to the surface. Drilling through this cap rock releases the oil during primary production, because the pressure in the drilling pipe is lower than the pressure in the reservoir rock.

People had already been using various forms of oil for more than 5000 years. For example, the Babylonians used asphalt 4000 years ago for building their walls and towers, and ancient Persian tablets record the use of petroleum for lighting and medicinal purposes. In the 8th century, Baghdad's streets were

¹ In this chapter, the terms oil, petroleum, and crude oil mean the same. Unless quoted otherwise, most of the opinions, facts, and figures quoted in this chapter come from a synopsis written by Joseph P. Riva, Jr. and Gordon I. Atwater under the entry *petroleum* in the Encyclopædia Britannica, as well as a book titled *Beyond Oil* written by Kenneth S. Deffeyes, and various Wikipedia articles.

Arthur O.R. Thormann

≈

paved with tar derived from petroleum through destructive distillation. In the 9th century, al-Razi distilled petroleum to produce chemicals such as kerosene, which he used to invent kerosene lamps for use in the oil lamp industry. Up until the 1850s, oil producers still skimmed crude oil off the top of ponds. In 1825, Imperial Russia already produced 3,500 tons of oil, doubling its output by mid-century. Oil drilling began as early as 1848 in Azerbaijan. Then, the Russian Empire built two large pipelines to transport oil from Chechnya to Baku on the Caspian Sea, and from Baku to the Black Sea port of Batumi. Next, in 1859, Edwin L. Drake and his crew, working for the Seneca Oil Company in Titusville, Pennsylvania, drilled the first modern oil well. This truly launched the modern world's oil industry.

Of course, oil companies must distill and refine the crude oil to produce various products, get the maximum use out of it, and meet the users' demand for gasoline, jet fuel, kerosene, heating oil, lubricating oil, asphalt, and so on. The greatest demand, naturally, is for gasoline. A barrel of crude oil only yields 25-35% gasoline, therefore, oil companies may also use a cracking process to change the molecular structure of crude oil and increase this yield to over 50%.

Let us look at the daily and yearly consumption of crude oil. On August 12, 2009, the International Energy Agency (IEA) raised its oil demand forecasts: for 2009, to 83.9 million barrels per day, and, for 2010, to 85.3 million barrels per day. This average of 84.6 million barrels per day for the two years translates to a

The World of Crude Oil

≈

54-year supply of oil, providing that the estimate of the remaining recoverable oil of 1.667 trillion barrels is correct,² and providing this average consumption remains the same for the next 54 years.

Our obvious question must be, “What is our present oil supply in the world – discovered and undiscovered?” We get much conflicting information regarding the remaining crude oil in the world.

One of the oddities we are up against is the concept of peak oil. The Wikipedia gives us the following definition: “Peak oil is the point in time when the maximum rate of petroleum extraction is reached, after which the rate of production enters terminal decline.” I have some problems with this definition. My first problem is with the use of the word *rate*. Most of us understand this word to mean x number of units per hour, like traveling at 50 miles per hour. So, can anyone in his or her right mind tell us for sure when all the oil companies together reach this maximum production point for the number of barrels of oil per day or per year? What I mean is, even when the world comes close to the end of its oil supply, this *rate* of production can still be increasing.

However, suppose the Wikipedia definition is wrong and should be, “Peak oil is the half-way point of production of the world’s total oil endowment.” I still have a problem: How can any of the so-called experts ever determine for sure what the world’s total oil

² Most experts agree that the world’s total oil endowment is between two and three trillion barrels, but I have read recently that this figure could be as high as ten trillion.

Arthur O.R. Thormann

≈

endowment really is? Almost weekly, various news media inundate us with news of new discoveries. Our latest headlines as of May 28, 2009: The Arctic holds 13% of the undiscovered³ crude oil in the world, with the largest single field off Alaska! Naturally, various countries, especially the superpowers, will now fiercely contest the ownership of this precious resource – perhaps even fight for it. However, we ordinary folks just want to know, how much crude oil *is* remaining in the world, both discovered and undiscovered? Since the easier oil fields are reportedly drying up, we have to ask ourselves, how much more crude oil can be discovered under the ocean floor?

As reported on September 2nd 2009 by Dow Jones Newswires, BP PLC drilled more than six miles (35,055 feet) into its Tiber well via a semi-submersible rig, operated by Transocean, in the deep waters (4,130 feet) of the Gulf of Mexico, 400 kilometers offshore, for a “giant” oil discovery that probably holds more than 3.0 billion barrels of oil equivalent. Obviously, such discoveries, although welcome, will prove to be very costly. Therefore, the future price of oil must increase not only because of the diminishing supply but also because of the higher discovery and production costs. The same problem exists for the development of the oil sands or bituminous shale; producing oil or natural gas through conventional well drilling is far less complex and far cheaper than producing oil from tar sands or from shale.

³ What puzzles me is how the experts measure something that remains undiscovered, but experts must have a way of doing it.

The World of Crude Oil

≈

During the 1970s, when the experts gave us dire predictions of the shortage of oil remaining in the world, a Mormon friend of mine told me that God has promised us we will never run out of oil.⁴ At our then existing oil-consumption rate, this assertion did not make much sense to me; now, I can see some logic in it.

The experts have given us very sound reasoning regarding nature's oil-producing process, but, when you read their reports, you get the feeling that this process is a *fait accompli*. I believe that nature's process is still ongoing, albeit with a slower *rate* of supply than the *rate* of our consumption. I also believe that the rate of our oil consumption is going to slow down considerably as the world supply of oil gets shorter, simply because most of us can no longer afford to purchase oil, and because other, cheaper energy sources will be available to us. Other reasons for reduced oil consumption are our fear that its use is causing global warming, or that its production, as from the tar sands, is causing irreversible ecological damages to the environment. Car manufacturers are very much aware of the global-warming dilemma and are doing everything they can to improve the designs of their engines.

Compared to the well-production cost of conventional oil, companies producing oil from oil sands sometimes determine that their production costs

⁴ Unfortunately, he did not tell me where he had obtained this bit of wisdom.

Arthur O.R. Thormann

≈

are too high for further expansion.⁵ Then, there is the economic dilemma of drilling costs being too high for oil recovery in smaller fields. Furthermore, as primary oil production⁶ ends in the larger fields, and after enhanced secondary recovery becomes uneconomical, even with carbon dioxide⁷ injection, about half of the original oil in most underground reservoirs remains, and may never be economically recoverable.

For these reasons, I concluded that the world's oil supply is going to remain with us for a very long time – probably as long as life on Earth is possible and beyond. Nevertheless, since the cost of recovering more oil will eventually become astronomical, we must continue to look for alternatives. Finding alternatives is also important because, as our scientists

⁵ When the spot price of oil dropped to \$40 (U.S.) per barrel, about the cost of producing oil from oil sands, most oil-producing companies put any more oil-sands production projects on hold. An October 1, 2009, announcement by Cenovus, an oil company set to emerge from EnCana Corp., to build a new multibillion-dollar oil sands project near Narrows Lake, comes when the price of oil fluctuates between \$67 and \$72 (U.S.) a barrel. However, at a \$67-a-barrel oil price, the company only realizes a price for its bitumen of \$52 to \$54 a barrel, and after operating costs it can net more than \$40 a barrel. Expansions of current EnCana oil sands projects have cost under \$20,000 (U.S.) per producing barrel of oil, but Cenovus's new project will be pricier. At \$30,000 (U.S.) per producing barrel, the total cost of a 100,000-barrel-a-day project would be \$3-billion. The company expects to produce 400,000 barrels a day by 2018, two years later than forecast before the economic crisis.

⁶ Primary oil production extracts only about a quarter of the original oil in an underground reservoir.

⁷ Of the various injection methods using water, detergent, nitrogen, polymer, solvent, steam, and fire flooding, carbon dioxide seems to be the biggest winner.

The World of Crude Oil

≈

constantly assure us, we must keep global warming to a minimum, lest we all perish.

The best alternative energy sources will probably come from our sun, our wind, our rivers, and our ocean tides, since resources like natural gas and uranium will eventually diminish as well, although they are excellent short-term alternatives. Besides, people are wary of nuclear energy plants, especially after the partial core meltdown in Unit 2 at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, in 1979, and the Reactor 4 explosion at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986. The latter resulted in highly radioactive fallout into the atmosphere and over an extensive geographical area, reaching as far as Ireland.

You have reached the end of this sample

Want to keep reading?

You can buy this book at **PageMasterPublishing.ca/Shop**

To find more books by Canadian authors or inquire about publishing your own book, contact PageMaster at:

PageMaster Publication Services Inc.

11340 - 120 Street, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T5G 0W5

books@pagemaster.ca

780-425-9303